
Introduction

Who Murdered “Marigold”?

Warsaw, December 6, 1966: a date that should live in diplomatic infamy. Five thousand miles away, the Vietnam War is raging, with the dead piling up and the escalating violence poisoning international affairs and American politics. Early that morning, the Pentagon informs President Lyndon B. Johnson at his Texas ranch that 6,250 U.S. military personnel have been killed in Vietnam (and Laos) since January 1961, when his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, took office¹—but few imagine that 52,000 more Americans are still to die, along with millions of Vietnamese on both sides of the 17th Parallel. Outwardly, the bloodshed shows no sign of subsiding.

Yet, far from Southeast Asia’s jungles and rice paddies, in this gray, frigid Central European city, a secret breakthrough for peace seems imminent. The United States and North Vietnam lack diplomatic relations and, relying on combat to resolve their clashing visions, appear stuck in a Catch-22 that precludes direct negotiations: Hanoi insists that it will not talk until Washington stops the bombing it began in early 1965, and Washington maintains just as stubbornly that it will not halt the raids until assured that Hanoi will pay a reasonable price, such as curbing its support for the Communist insurgency fighting to topple the U.S.-backed regime in Saigon.

But on that cloudy Tuesday, after months of furtive machinations by Polish and Italian intermediaries (with the Soviets lurking in the shadows), Washington and Hanoi have agreed that their ambassadors to Poland will meet to confirm a ten-point outline of a settlement, or at least a basis for direct talks. John A. Gronouski and Do Phat Quang are but a short stroll apart on the western banks of the Vistula River, the American huddling with Poland’s foreign minister at his office, the North Vietnamese waiting at his embassy with a special emissary who has flown all the way from Hanoi to deliver guidance for the unprecedented encounter—a document so sensitive that his wife sewed it into his vest, and a senior North Vietnamese official ordered him to destroy it before dying if his plane crashed.

Yet the rendezvous between enemy diplomats does not occur that day . . . or the next . . . or the next, until, a week later, the whole business collapsed in a welter of mutual recriminations, hidden at first, but soon to explode into a scandal that would attract global headlines and widen President Johnson's "credibility gap"—and then vanish into history, unresolved, concealed by the thick fogs of war, diplomacy, and Cold War secrecy. To LBJ, it was all shadows and mirrors, a "dry creek," because the "simple truth" was that Hanoi was not ready to talk; his surrogates, from Dean Rusk to Walt Rostow to William Bundy to Averell Harriman to Robert McNamara to Henry Cabot Lodge, loyally parroted the party line (despite private doubts in some cases) that it was all a phony, a Polish "scam" or "sham" or "fraud" or "shell-game"—or even a KGB disinformation plot.

But to the junior Polish diplomat behind the "ten points," Janusz Lewandowski—the lone Communist ambassador in anticommunist Saigon—it was a squandered chance to stop the carnage, save uncounted lives, and dramatically alter history. At the time, the man at the center of what became known as the "Lewandowski Affair" remained shrouded in mystery, rebuffing reporters. For this book, four decades later, he has told his story for the first time. Sitting in a smoke-filled café in Warsaw, he recalled being pleased when Washington and Hanoi met in Paris and concluded the 1973 accords ending the war (or at least direct U.S. military involvement), "but I thought, my God, we could have done it better and seven years ago, you know, better because the solution also would be better for the United States than this havoc which happened."

Do you really believe the war could have been ended six or seven years earlier? I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "That was my feeling. And it still is."

Was Lewandowski right? Could America have escaped its disastrous involvement in Vietnam years earlier, and at far less cost, than it actually did? Was a real chance for peace tragically squandered? Or was LBJ right, that the "simple truth" was that no opportunity was missed? Was its failure predestined; accidental; or "death by murder," as a key participant (an American ally, no less) privately fumed, blaming Washington for its ill-timed bombing of Hanoi? What really happened? What went wrong?

Seeking answers to these haunting questions, this book explores one of the last great mysteries of the war that Henry Kissinger has retrospectively termed "the defining experience of the second half of the twentieth century" and "the black hole of American historical memory"²—the clandestine peace initiative, bearing the U.S. code name "Marigold," that in late 1966 sought to end the fighting, or at least open direct talks, between Washington and Hanoi. For some tantalizing days that December, this initiative seemed on the verge of success, but ultimately it failed and the war dragged on and even grew bloodier. The Marigold episode—which became an international scandal when it seeped into public view in early 1967, and was the focus of a brief yet intense "war of leaks"—sank into history as

an unresolved controversy. Antiwar critics claimed that LBJ had botched (or, worse, deliberately sabotaged) a breakthrough for peace by bombing Hanoi on the eve of a planned historic secret encounter between American and North Vietnamese representatives in Warsaw. Conversely, the president and his top aides angrily insisted that there was no “missed opportunity,” that Poland (the key mediator) likely never had the authority to arrange direct talks, and that Hanoi was not ready to negotiate. The conventional wisdom echoes this view, presuming that the combatants were then far too dug in and committed to chasing a military victory or advantage to enter into serious negotiations.

This book challenges this conventional wisdom. It establishes that Warsaw *was*, in fact, authorized by Hanoi to open direct contacts with Washington, and that North Vietnam’s leaders *did* commit themselves to entering direct talks. It reveals LBJ’s personal role in bombing Hanoi, at a pivotal moment, disregarding the pleas of both the Poles and his own senior aides. It argues not only that Marigold, far from a “nonevent,” was truly a “missed opportunity” but also that the initiative’s failure tilted Hanoi against negotiations and set it on the path toward the Tet Offensive in early 1968.

The book’s historical implications are thus immense. It contends that Washington (and LBJ) could have entered into talks with Hanoi in late 1966 rather than in 1968, and in far more auspicious circumstances. Marigold might thus not only have considerably shortened the war (or at least the massive U.S. military involvement in it), but also drastically altered American political history, for LBJ’s failure to open talks with Hanoi fostered the rise of an antiwar challenge that led him to abandon his quest for reelection. If his decisions (and contingent events) had varied only slightly, the book shows, the subsequent trajectory of events could have looked very different. (I conclude with a counterfactual analysis of what might have occurred if Marigold had succeeded.)

Beyond Marigold, the book offers a unique perspective on a crucial year during the Vietnam War, through the eyes of Janusz Lewandowski, a Polish Communist diplomat in South Vietnam (which no Communist country recognized) from April 1966 to May 1967, who dealt at top levels with Americans and both South and North Vietnamese, from William Westmoreland, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Nguyen Van Thieu to Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap. It presents Lewandowski’s untold story on the basis of dozens of hours of tape-recorded interviews and thousands of declassified Polish *sztyfrogramy* and other documents. (The perspective of Marigold’s other driving force, Giovanni D’Orlandi, Italy’s passionate ambassador in Saigon, is likewise evoked in deeply personal terms, from his intimate diary as well as his secret *telegramma*.)

When recounting the Vietnam War, historians often rush past the period between 1965 (when Washington spiked its military role) and 1968 (when the Tet Offensive forced LBJ to seek an exit), summing it up with a single word: escalation. Yet, as this book shows, this period bulged with fascinating events vital to

understanding the conflict's later course and eventual outcome. Readers familiar with the war will encounter well-known U.S. officials (LBJ, Rusk, McNamara, the Bundys, Rostow, et al.), albeit often in unfamiliar situations, but lesser-known figures also seize the stage, ranging from the Polish and Italian envoys in Saigon and their foreign ministers in Warsaw and Rome to LBJ's own man in Poland, as do Soviet and Chinese leaders (Brezhnev, Kosygin, Gromyko, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, et al.) and, most important of all, the secretive North Vietnamese. It is a tapestry of the international history of the Vietnam War that no one at the time, no matter how exalted his "vantage point" (as LBJ titled his memoirs), could have fathomed—or that prior accounts have constructed.

More broadly, this book explores once-obscure contours of the wider Cold War at a crucial juncture with the help of long-inaccessible Communist and other non-U.S. sources, including archives from and interviews in more than fifteen countries—Vietnam, Poland, Italy, England, Canada, Russia, China, Australia, India, Hungary, Albania, the Netherlands, and others. Moreover, this tangled tale of covert Vietnam diplomacy coincided with another mysterious, momentous story: the sharpening Sino-Soviet schism, as Moscow and Beijing entered an even more acrimonious phase of their confrontation. (For Americans who lived through the war, the fresh evidence of intracommunist mistrust, and even enmity, bears little resemblance to the simplistic Cold War rhetoric then often purveyed by politicians and some government officials implying a coordinated Communist menace.)

Even as this book provides fly-on-the-wall glimpses of this Sino-Soviet rivalry—when, for instance, at a cocktail party in Hanoi at the height of the war, a Chinese military attaché challenged a Soviet counterpart to a fistfight—it also goes behind the public protestations of solidarity within both the Warsaw Pact and NATO to reveal hidden tensions (between Soviets and Poles, among the Poles themselves, between Washington and allies such as Ottawa and London), and even instances of cooperation and commiseration across the "Iron Curtain." In so doing, it exemplifies a recent trend toward "pericentrism" in Cold War history, transcending a Washington-centric (or even U.S.- and Soviet-dominated) narrative to integrate more fully the motives and behavior of other important actors, which did not merely march in lockstep with and follow the orders of their super-power patrons.

How was Marigold transformed from an ultrasecret international diplomatic effort into a headline-grabbing global public scandal? This book presents a unique case study of national security leaking, still a perennial feature of Washington policymaking. By using both declassified files from various governments and reporters' private notes, it shows how U.S., Polish, and other officials competitively disclosed contradictory accounts of the failed peace bid (to the pope, the United Nations secretary-general, and other governments as well as to selected reporters) as they attempted to manipulate public and international opinion—and

how the disputed tale became entangled with the internal politics of the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times*, among other publications. This “war of leaks” brings into the mix some of the era’s emblematic figures: Robert F. Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, Bill Moyers, Norman Cousins, William Fulbright, U Thant, Harrison Salisbury, Wilfred Burchett, and others.

This book also examines how Marigold has remained a matter of contested history, that “argument without end.” From official perspectives emerging in the memoirs of LBJ and his associates (and in the declassified record in the Pentagon Papers’ “negotiating volumes,” which were *not* leaked to the *New York Times* by Daniel Ellsberg in 1971 but emerged only gradually), to later accounts by historians, the meaning of the tale—a missed chance for peace, or much ado about nothing, or very little?—has been hotly disputed, with more than a few analysts throwing up their hands in exasperation at Marigold’s confusion and convolution. Though not pretending to be the endlessly elusive “last word” (which hardly exists on any complex event), this book does resolve mysteries that have lain for decades at the core of this tantalizing affair.

Unfortunately, the story of Marigold holds more than historical interest. The end of the Cold War, in whose name Washington waged the Vietnam War, hardly ended the United States’ foreign military interventions or its involvement in crises that threaten to flare into war. From Serbia to Iraq to Afghanistan, from Iran to North Korea, from Cuba to China to Libya and beyond, the United States has continued to confront the challenge of comprehending and communicating with its actual or potential adversaries across cultural, linguistic, and ideological gulfs—with distinctly mixed results. Probing deeply into how the Johnson administration grappled with a tempting yet uncertain peace overture, trying to balance the hope of escaping a painful military predicament with entrenched skepticism and incomprehension toward the North Vietnamese enemy (and its Polish and Soviet backers), this book offers a case study pertinent to such issues as war termination, communication between belligerents, third-party mediation, “signaling,” and coercive diplomacy.

At the book’s heart, however, is the dramatic story—part mystery, part thriller, and ultimately Shakespearean tragedy with a few dashes of farce tossed in—of a few men who tried against long odds to change history for the better, and who in late 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, came closer to succeeding than has previously been realized. “No episode in our history, I believe, will baffle our posterity more than the Indochina war,” the historian Arthur Schlesinger wrote in 1971, as the fighting still ground on. “Many, perhaps most, Americans already find it incredible that we ever considered our national interest so vitally engaged in Vietnam as to justify the death of 50,000 Americans and God knows how many Vietnamese in the longest war Americans have ever fought.”²³ The drama of Marigold’s rise, fall, and disputed memory recounted in this book helps to explain how that conflict expanded, unnecessarily, far beyond any conceivable intrinsic

importance in the global Cold War that dominated world affairs and American politics and foreign policy for nearly half a century after World War II.

But telling this tale requires first setting the stage and introducing the dramatis personae—and exhuming the buried tale of what happened in Washington, Warsaw, and Hanoi (among other locales) during LBJ’s thirty-seven-day bombing “pause” that began on Christmas Eve 1965.